

CHRISTIAN BENEVOLENCE

RECOMMENDED,

IN

A SERMON

ON

PHILIPPIANS II. 4,

PREACHED AT A MEETING OF MINISTERS,

APRIL 3, 1792,

AT LITTLE BADDOW, ESSEX,

AND PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST.

*By S. WILMSHURST.*

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## A D V E R T I S E M E N T.

IN one part of the following discourse the reader will find that the author has briefly, yet freely, expressed his sentiments respecting civil establishments of religion ; he can truly say without the least intention to offend a single person who differs from him in sentiment on this subject. His great aim through the whole discourse has been to promote the happiness of his fellow creatures, by endeavouring to impress their minds with just sentiments of right and wrong ;—to form or cherish in them correspondent dispositions ;—and thus to regulate their temper and conduct agreeably to the righteous and immutable rule of our Saviour, “ All things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them \*.” But it requires very little penetration to discern, whether civil establishments of religion be in their own nature calculated to promote *this* desirable end ; and the world has had sufficient experience of their effects for more than the space of a thousand years, to direct what judgment it ought to form on this subject †.

If religion be a personal concern, and if no man be lord of another’s conscience (which are axioms in theology), how then can it be conceived that a majority in any community, acting according to the above eternal law of rectitude, can impose any mode or form of religion on such as disapprove of it, or compel them to contribute towards its support ?

It is indeed readily granted, that a nation, or even the minority, hath a right to establish, by common consent, any

\* Mat. vii. 12.      † See an excellent pamphlet lately published by the Rev. William Parry of Little Baddow, entitled, *Thoughts on such Penal Religious Statutes as affect the Protestant Dissenters.*

form of religion for themselves, and to support and maintain that form ; but can they compel others to support it, without manifest injustice ?

The Dissenters in this country, however, do, and ought, to think themselves in a much happier situation than many of their predecessors, in proportion as the legislature has conceded to them their just rights as members of the community. It is their ambition to approve themselves good citizens, notwithstanding the degree of oppression and unjust odium under which they still remain. They have a sufficient share of good sense to know, and of humanity to feel, that they do not possess a degree of freedom equal to that enjoyed by their fellow citizens.

Nevertheless, the friends of establishments may be perfectly satisfied that Dissenters, regulating their temper and conduct according to the principles recommended in the following discourse, will never make use of any means injurious to others, in order to obtain a perfect freedom, in a religious view, for themselves. They will cheerfully submit to the inconveniences they at present experience, and continue to do all the good offices in their power to their fellow citizens who differ from them in their sentiments of religious freedom, until the nation in general shall be awake to universal justice. When that happy period shall arrive, these inconveniences will be done away of course.

MALDON,  
April 19, 1792.

## CHRISTIAN BENEVOLENCE

RECOMMENDED, &c.

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### PHILIPPIANS ii. 4.

*Look not every man on his own things, but every man  
also on the things of others.*

THE gospel recommends itself to us by the important discoveries it makes, and its great utility to mankind in different points of view. While it reveals such truths as unassisted reason could never have discovered; while it makes known the divinely-appointed and only method of a sinner's reconciliation to God; it exhibits to our admiring view the law of nature in its most amiable form, and enjoins upon us a conformity to it by the most cogent and engaging motives.

A due consideration of the Epistles of Paul, and of the other Apostles of our Lord, will evince the truth of these assertions. Are we guilty before God, the Gospel reveals a sure way of pardon, honourable to the divine character and government. Is our nature disordered by sin, the gospel is perfectly adapted to rectify whatever is amiss in the soul of man. Has our conduct towards our Maker and our fellow creatures been unrighteous, the gospel is designed to reduce it to the standard of rectitude. So that the gospel, if rightly understood, will not fail of producing in us the most salutary effects, since it

contains, in its doctrines, precepts, and promises, every thing requisite to our holiness and felicity.

The Apostle Paul felt its happy influence upon himself, and was animated thereby to preach, write, and pray, that others might be partakers of his grace, or brought to entertain similar views and sentiments of the gospel with himself, and experience the like beneficial effects of it on their temper and conduct. He therefore begins this second chapter to the Philippians with exhorting them, in the most earnest and affectionate manner, to exemplify in their deportment towards one another the amiable, conciliating, and benevolent spirit of genuine Christianity. “ If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfil ye my joy, that ye be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind: let nothing be done through strife or vain-glory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.”

The great duty to which the Apostle here exhorts the Philippians is love; and the several things enjoined in these verses may be considered only as different modifications and expressions of this amiable affection. “ Love is the law of Christ’s kingdom, the lesson of his school, the livery of his family \*.” Where this prevails it will banish discord, angry

\* Vid. Henry.

contentions,

contentions, and injuries of all kinds, and will promote peace, harmony, and friendly intercourse between brethren.

The religion of Jesus is a social religion, and love is the bond of society. Whatever difference there may be amongst Christians in point of sentiment, they ought to be all united by this common bond. This love should be mutual, for no Christian is exempt from the duty of loving his brother, no Christian ought to be excluded from the benefit of being loved by his brother. And what is the effect of love? How will it operate towards our brethren? The words of our text answer these questions, as they point out the manner in which love is manifested, and its beneficial influence widely diffused, namely, by interesting ourselves in what concerns the welfare of our brethren. "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others."

One great design of Christianity is to divest us of our narrow, contracted, selfish principles, whereby all a man's thoughts, study, care, and labour, centre in himself as their principal end. In opposition to these contracted principles, it is intended to open and expand the heart, by infusing the generous principles of benevolence towards all mankind, and especially towards our Christian brethren. A Christian spirit, therefore, will lead us to "interest ourselves in the concerns of others, not in a way of curiosity and censoriousness, or as busy bodies in other

men's matters, but in Christian love and sympathy. "Look not every man on his own things," *i. e.* on his own things only, "but every man also on the things of others." A selfish spirit is destructive of Christian love. We must be concerned not only for our own credit, liberty, ease, safety, and welfare, but for those of others also: we must love our neighbour as ourselves, and make his case our own \*."

Thus the duty here recommended to the Philippians is of perpetual obligation on all Christians in all ages. It is always incumbent on them to regard not their own welfare only, but also that of their brethren. Every Christian ought to be, and, as far as he is acquainted with, and influenced by, the noble principles of his holy religion, is, of a public spirit; he is an universal philanthropist; he interests himself in the welfare of all mankind; and has a benevolent regard for their temporal, but especially for their spiritual and eternal happiness. Were it needful to cite any particular passages from the New Testament in proof of this, a great variety might be mentioned. Indeed it is the manifest design and tendency of the whole gospel to promote in Christians a generous and benevolent spirit towards their fellow Christians, and towards all mankind, and to excite them to such beneficent actions as are conducive to their welfare.

The gospel in general then commands Christians

\* Ibid.

to love and (as they have opportunity) to do good unto all men, even their enemies and persecutors, but especially their Christian friends, or such as "are of the household of faith."

What I shall principally attempt, therefore, in this discourse is, to offer some hints, which may point out how the Christian's regard for the welfare of others should operate. This I shall do with a view to promote your acquaintance with the nature and extent of the duty here enjoined, and to animate you to greater zeal, diligence, and fidelity, in the discharge of it.

As to the nature of the duty, it may be observed in general, that a regard to the welfare of others is that Christian virtue, that amiable quality of the mind, which prompts us to all kinds of beneficent actions. It is that right disposition towards our fellow creatures, which is the proper source of those actions, and without which, whatever advantages men may derive from *them*, they are not, strictly speaking, acts of obedience to this divine precept, as they are not performed from a suitable regard for the welfare of our fellow creatures, but from some sinister motives, or to some unwarrantable and selfish ends.

The duty under consideration, therefore, commences in a benevolent frame and disposition of mind towards our fellow creatures, and consists,

First,—In sincerely wishing them every blessing requisite to their present and future welfare; and,  
upon

upon proper occasions, forming our benevolent wishes into serious and earnest prayers to the Supreme Being, the author and giver of all blessings, the source of all true felicity. In this way the Apostle Paul himself remarkably exemplified that Christian temper which he endeavoured to promote in the Philippians. He not only wished them grace and peace from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ \*, but made a solemn appeal to God to prove the sincerity of his affection for them. “ For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ ; and this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge, and in all judgment, that ye may approve things that are excellent, that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, to the praise and glory of God †.” He did not confine his benevolent wishes within the limits of the Christian profession, but extended them even to the unbelieving Jews : they were interested in his earnest and affectionate prayers to God. “ Brethren,” says he, “ my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved †.” And thus all Christians should continue to shew their regard for the welfare of their fellow creatures, by their affectionate and fervent prayers to God for them.

Secondly,—Christians should do this, by their sympathetic concern for the follies, sins, and mi-

\* Ch. i. 3.

† Ch. i. 8—12.

‡ Rom. x. 1.

series

series of their fellow creatures. The condition of mankind as sinners is truly deplorable ; and the spiritual condition of impenitent sinners is such as demands the pity of all who form just conceptions of it from the divine testimony. They see them dead in trespasses and sins, without any proper sense of their guilt and misery, wretchedly ignorant of God, of Jesus Christ, of themselves, and of the nature and way of salvation as revealed in the gospel ; slaves to their depraved passions and sensual appetites, enemies to God in their minds by wicked works, under the condemning sentence of the divine law, exposed every moment to the stroke of death, and to everlasting perdition ; and yet as easy and tranquil (it may be) in their own mind, as if they were in a state of perfect security.

Now what intelligent Christian can reflect upon this awful situation, in which he has reason to fear many of his fellow creatures around him are, without feeling emotions of grief and sorrow on their account, or without being affected with compassion towards them ?

In this manner was our Apostle affected for his brethren the Jews. " I say the truth in Christ ; I lie not ; my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart, for I could wish myself accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen, according to the flesh \*." On this account

\* Rom. ix. 1, 2, 3.

also

also our Lord himself was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; he was grieved for the hardness of the hearts of sinners, and wept for the temporal and eternal miseries which he foresaw were coming upon them. Therefore, further,

The temporal situation and circumstances of vast multitudes of the human race are such as demand the sympathetic concern of the Christian. How many of them are groaning under the yoke of tyranny and oppression! How many are pining away a miserable life, while destined to wear the galling chains of slavery! What distress and misery are often occasioned to multitudes of our fellow creatures by war, famine, earthquakes, fire, hurricanes, the plague, and other calamities to which mankind are liable! What distress and misery do many bring upon themselves, and others, by their vicious and profligate courses! It is impossible to enumerate every species of misery and wretchedness that abounds amongst mankind in consequence of sin. Poverty, pain, and sickness, a prison, and a gibbet, are some of them. Could we be eye-witnesses to all the calamities and miseries which multitudes of the human race are suffering at this moment, what a dreadful shock must our humanity receive! It is wise, it is benevolent, in the Great Supreme, to conceal them from our eyes: but still we hear and know so much of them, as should excite in our breast tender emotions of humanity and compassion towards our suffering brethren: for the benevolent spirit of Chrif-

tianity constrains us to weep with them that weep. It also directs us to rejoice with them that rejoice. And, therefore,

Thirdly,—Christians should further shew their regard for the happiness of mankind, by rejoicing in every event which has a tendency to promote their welfare. They should rejoice in that spirit of inquiry which seems now to be diffusing itself amongst different classes, more extensively than in former times: they should rejoice that the discussion of political, moral, and religious subjects, is becoming more general: they should rejoice in the freedom of the press, as the grand medium of promoting and facilitating this discussion, and of diffusing useful knowledge amongst mankind: they should rejoice in the downfall of despotism, feudality, bigotry, and superstition, which has likewise in a considerable degree been effected by these means: they should rejoice in the progress and extension of civil and religious liberty, and in every useful discovery or improvement that has been made in arts and sciences, and in civil government: but more especially should they rejoice in the diffusion of religious knowledge, and in the accession of true converts to the church and kingdom of Christ—in the immortal privileges conferred upon his subjects—in the dignity and happiness to which they are advanced—in their exemplary lives, and in the beneficial influence derived from them to the world in general.

The

The advancement and success of the Messiah's kingdom, or the spread of real Christianity, is spoken of in many parts of the Old Testament as what would be a source of great benefit and joy to mankind; and that man must have a narrow and contracted soul indeed, who is incapable of perceiving the beneficial influence of Christianity (where it prevails) on the state of human beings; and who does not feel the most refined pleasure therein.

Every one who is acquainted with the infinite importance of the gospel, who is actuated by its noble and benevolent principles, cannot but rejoice in its success: which leads me to observe,

Fourthly,—That Christians should evince their regard for the welfare of their fellow creatures by exerting their best endeavours, in the use of lawful and proper means, to meliorate the condition of mankind in general, and of such as are within the circle of their acquaintance in particular.

The concatenation of causes is so vastly extensive, that, under the divine superintendence, the endeavours of a single Christian may, in some form or other, have a beneficial influence upon the whole world in succeeding generations of mankind. What an animating consideration to the Christian! What a delightful motive to exert the best abilities his Maker has given him, for the benefit of his fellow creatures, and particularly of those around him who may receive immediate advantage thereby!

Every

Every Christian, therefore, should endeavour to meliorate the condition of others by an exemplary life and conversation, or by an example of true piety towards God, and of justice, benevolence, and charity, towards men. His obligations to each require that he should be humble, chaste, sober, and temperate; and likewise diligent and industrious in the duties of his calling for the good of society. Thus should he let his light shine before men, that they may see his good works, and glorify his Father who is in heaven. Whatever duties the Christian is called to, he should endeavour to discharge with diligence, zeal, and fidelity, for the honour of God, and the good of mankind; and thereby contribute something towards promoting either their temporal or spiritual advantage. Those ideas of human or divine things, which he has acquired, and which he conceives may be beneficial, he should be ready, according to his abilities, to communicate to others; —to his children, his servants, his neighbours, or his acquaintance. He should use his best endeavours to diffuse among them just sentiments of God, of Jesus Christ, of true religion, of civil and religious liberty, or of the rights of man, in his social capacity; and of every other useful subject with which he is acquainted. He should also endeavour to divest himself of all unjust prejudices, that he may be open to conviction, and ready to receive information and instruction from others. All this would be conducive to the mutual advantage of Christians,

and

and to the extension of useful knowledge amongst mankind in general.

Christians should further endeavour to promote the welfare of others, by shewing their disapprobation of vice and wickedness, or of an improper temper and behaviour in those with whom they are conversant; and by encouraging virtue and piety, or true religion, and whatever is commendable and praise-worthy in them.

To reprove another for sin, or an impropriety, is not indeed so pleasant a duty as to commend him for his virtue or excellence; but in some circumstances it may be as much a duty, and perhaps a greater act of benevolence. Nathan, no doubt, acted from a principle of benevolence, when he brought the charge of adultery home to David: so did Paul, when he withstood Peter to the face for an act of dissimulation or duplicity, because he was worthy of blame. This Apostle's reproofs and commendations of some of the churches to which he wrote, proceeded from the same benevolent principle, and were designed to reclaim them from error and sin, or to confirm and establish them in the faith, and in the love and practice of piety and virtue, and thus to promote their holiness and felicity.

Christians should likewise endeavour to promote the welfare of others, by contributing towards a supply of their temporal wants according to their ability and opportunity. If providence has given them success in their temporal affairs, or intrusted

them

them with a larger portion of worldly property than is sufficient for their own support and comfort, they ought to employ a part of it for the relief and assistance of such as are in indigent circumstances, in that way which they may have reason to think will be most useful to them. And those Christians who have not this ability to assist the indigent, may yet shew a regard for their welfare, by making known and recommending their cases to others, who are able and willing to relieve such as are proper objects of pecuniary assistance. And the poorest Christian should shew his regard for the general good, by applying himself to some sort of useful labour, if he have ability for it. Indeed persons of every rank and profession, if they would act suitably to their character, privileges, and obligations, as Christians, should endeavour to contribute as much as they are able to the happiness of the public.

Magistrates should exercise the authority and power delegated to them from the people, to protect their liberties, properties, and lives; secure their characters and persons from insult and injury; and in every suitable way promote the welfare of society. Ministers of the gospel should exercise their sacred function with zeal and fidelity, for the diffusion of the most important knowledge amongst their fellow creatures; for the conversion of sinners from sin to God and holiness; and for the confirmation and establishment of their brethren in the profession,

faith, hope, love, and practice of genuine Christianity.

Parents and masters should endeavour to promote the present and future welfare of their children and domestics, by instructing them in the nature and importance of true religion; aiming to instil proper sentiments and dispositions into their minds, to form them for the service and enjoyment of their Maker, for being useful members of society here, and for the felicity of the heavenly state hereafter.

For the benefit of society, children and servants should also endeavour to fulfil the duties of their station, by a cheerful submission to the authority, and compliance with the just commands, of their superiors. In a word, all ranks and orders of men are bound by the law of nature, and by the benevolent religion of Jesus, to exert their best abilities to promote the welfare of their fellow creatures, to embrace all opportunities of doing them good, or of meliorating their condition, and so of adding to the stock of public felicity. "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others."

Our Apostle directs the Christians at Rome to discharge this duty by employing their several gifts and abilities in their different stations and offices for the public good. He addresses them as members of one body or sacred society. "We" (says he), "being many, are one body in Christ, and every one

one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministry; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation; he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without dissimulation; abhor that which is evil, cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another, with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; distributing to the necessity of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless them who persecute you, bless and curse not; rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep \*."

The above are only a few hints suggested to your consideration on a subject of vast extent and great importance to the welfare of society. May we all, however, sincerely endeavour to reduce them to practice, and then we shall have the satisfaction of contributing something towards the happiness of our fellow creatures!

From what has been said we may further learn,  
First,—That the religion of Jesus Christ is manifestly designed and perfectly adapted to promote the welfare of mankind. As far as its influence is felt, as far as its laws and precepts are put in practice,

\* Rom. xii.

so far it does actually promote human felicity. If all mankind were to become real Christians, and were to act conformably to the laws of Christ, they would all be truly happy; they would be mutual blessings to one another; and every one would exert himself to increase the stock of public happiness. What a glorious event would such a revolution in the sentiments and conduct of mankind be! How delightful to be a member of such a benevolent society! But, alas! this degree of improvement is too great for us sinful mortals to expect on earth. Let it suffice, that we shall (if real Christians) soon be admitted to participate in the more refined pleasures and exalted joys of the spirits of just men made perfect; a society free from every imperfection, dignified and ennobled with every amiable grace and virtue to enhance their mutual felicity. Let every Christian strive to the utmost of his abilities to render the sacred society to which he belongs on earth a brighter, a fairer emblem of this perfect society in heaven. Let us entirely yield up ourselves to the salutary influence of genuine Christianity, and then we cannot fail of contributing something towards this desirable and important end: then will our graces and virtues not only help to adorn the church, but to instruct, reform, and felicitate the world. And as all this is the design and genuine effect of the religion of Jesus, it serves to evince that this religion is truly divine; it certainly came from that Supreme Being whose amiable character is love.

Secondly,

Secondly,—How ready should Christians be to begin, or encourage by every lawful and proper means in their power, any plans or institutions that are manifestly agreeable to the spirit of Christianity, and conducive to the welfare of mankind.

With this view they should countenance every scheme that tends to inform the minds of men, to relieve their exigencies, to rescue them from ignorance, vice, and misery, and promote their true felicity.

With this view should every Christian, according to his ability, cheerfully contribute towards the support of an evangelical ministry, and thus endeavour to render the temporal circumstances of such as are engaged in its important work, easy and comfortable ; that without embarrassment or distraction they may apply themselves to the business of instructing their hearers in those things which relate more especially to their spiritual and eternal welfare.

With this view Christians should be ready to encourage and promote the instruction of that numerous class of children who, on account of their parents' indigence or negligence, would generally grow up in ignorance, or idle and vicious habits, to the detriment of society, and to their own temporal and eternal ruin, if not reclaimed by a remarkable interposition of Divine mercy. This is a reason which should awaken our benevolent exertions to promote their instruction. May we not hope that the institution of Sunday Schools in a variety of places

places through the nation will (by the blessing of God) contribute in some measure to remedy such evils? These schools, therefore, ought to be encouraged by Christians,—by all who would look not on their own things only, but on the things of others also.

With this view, also, should Christians contribute towards the diffusion of all kinds of useful knowledge; such as the knowledge of God, and true religion, and of the civil as well as religious rights of men, in order to accelerate the progress of true liberty, and the entire abolition of civil and religious tyranny amongst mankind. Moreover,

With this view should Christians contribute, according to the utmost of their power, towards the abolition of a most iniquitous trade; I mean the slave trade, which has long been carried on with savage barbarity (in many instances), by men who call themselves Christians; but which, by a discussion of its horrid nature, and the general knowledge of it obtained thereby, is now become justly odious to the majority of the nation. Every Christian, therefore, who is acquainted with the nature of it, cannot but wish for its speedy and entire abolition; and if he thinks himself possessed of any influence, should make use of it for this purpose. I congratulate you, my friends, who have recently had an opportunity of bearing your testimony against this abominable traffick. Whatever the issue may be, you have the satisfaction of having publicly testified

your abhorrence of it, and your benevolent regard for the sacred rights of humanity \*.

Thirdly,—We may also learn from this subject, that whatever in its own nature is unjust, oppressive, and cruel, or in any respect injurious to the civil or religious rights and liberties of mankind, must necessarily be contrary to the true spirit of real Christianity. Hence all sin, or the violation of moral obligation in every form and degree, is contrary to its benevolent spirit. Hence all persecution on account of religion is also contrary to the spirit of Christianity, because it is injurious to the welfare of society. Hence I conceive all civil or national establishments of religion, in proportion as they infringe on the liberties of mankind, cannot but be contrary to the spirit of genuine Christianity. Can they, I ask, be maintained but at the expence of justice and equity, or without considerable degree of injury and oppression to many individuals of the community? And is not this peculiarly the case where such establishments are accompanied with their usual appendages of religious tests, and penal statutes against such as dissent from them? It is the duty, therefore, of Christians who are acquainted with the subject, to inform the minds of others, and lead them to entertain views of Christianity more rational and consonant with the New Testament, the whole tenor of which is no less opposite to injustice in every form and degree, than light to darkness.

\* Some of the auditory were amongst the numerous, humane, and respectable petitioners, for the abolition of the slave trade.

Fourthly,

Fourthly,—We may further learn from this subject, that it is the duty of Christians to rejoice, and be devoutly thankful to the Supreme Governor of the world for every change which improves the circumstances of individual persons, and especially of societies and whole nations of mankind. The true spirit of Christianity, therefore, infusing its benign influence into our minds, not only justifies our joy in, and gratitude to God for, those grand political events, by which millions of our fellow creatures are emancipated from civil and religious tyranny, and restored to the rights and privileges of free citizens; but makes this joy and gratitude our incumbent duty as men and Christians. May we not hope that those *glorious events* are the harbingers of the reign of universal peace and mutual benevolence amongst mankind? Viewed, therefore, in this pleasing light, they cannot but be welcomed by the Christian philanthropist as harbingers of joy.

To conclude. Let it be our earnest prayer and constant endeavour to imbibe more of the noble, generous, benevolent, and public spirit of Christianity, and to act at all times under its sacred and beneficial influence. Then, in obedience to our Maker, and in love to our fellow creatures, we shall endeavour to promote their best interests, their present and future welfare; and in so doing shall advance our own.

